

Riverside Press Enterprise

Efforts paying off for tribes

INLAND: A government association is considering whether to ask them to join the group.

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Armed with newfound wealth and lobbying powers, Inland tribal governments may soon become equal players in a regional government group that plays a key role in managing the area's rapid growth.

Members of the Western Riverside Council of Governments, which handles millions of dollars in transportation funding, said they likely will open the door to tribes. The council hasn't decided whether to give them full voting powers or let them serve in an advisory role. The council's executive members plan to discuss it May 2.

The development is the latest sign of Inland tribes' growing clout from their thriving casinos and other businesses. After decades of being ignored while new housing developments, roads, businesses and schools sprang up on reservation borders, tribal governments are getting a voice.

The head of the Tribal Alliance for Sovereign Indian Nations, which is made up almost entirely of Inland tribes, said the Western Riverside Council of Governments extended its tentative invitation a couple months ago. The alliance took that offer as a sign that its efforts to build ties to local governments are paying off, she said.

"We think it's a step in the right direction and another affirmation that tribes are legitimate governments, and people are coming to us now," said Lynn Valbuena, alliance chairwoman and a member of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. "A lot of people don't understand -- we're actually a government like any other state or local city or county."

Valbuena said tribes are interested in the invitation, but it's too early to know how many may accept. The council still has to hammer out legal details of its offer.

Eastern Riverside County tribes already participate in a similar organization, and tribes throughout the county and one in San Bernardino County are part of a joint task force with the Riverside County Board of Supervisors.

The Riverside County district attorney's office recently created a tribal-liaison unit, funded with Indian gaming money. The unit will deal primarily with crimes committed near tribal casinos.

Giving tribes a say in regional planning is the right move given their increasing economic sophistication and experience in self-governance, said Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley.

If approved, Ashley said he anticipates membership would be open to all western county tribes. Eligible tribes would include the Morongo Band of Mission Indians near Banning and tribes farther west.

"What they do on the reservations affects us and what we do in our cities affects them," Ashley said. "This is to everyone's mutual benefit."

One of the most logical areas for collaboration between local governments and tribes is planning for new roads, because economic development on reservations has resulted in increased traffic, Ashley said.

The nation's largest regional planning council, the Southern California Association of Governments, has been negotiating with tribes for two years to give Indian nations a voting seat on its council. SCAG, which is made up of Riverside County and five others, represents about 18 million Southern California residents.

Ron Roberts, a Temecula councilman and president of the association of governments, said the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians has helped the area secure millions of dollars in federal funding for a new bridge and roads. He supports allowing them to join that larger body. The Pechanga band runs the Pechanga Resort & Casino.

"We need them there as a resource to help us because, frankly, they are great lobbyists in Sacramento and Washington," Roberts said.

Tribes in eastern Riverside County already have voting powers through a memorandum of understanding with the Coachella Valley Association of Governments.